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ILLICIT SPEECH, UNSAYABLE BODIES AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY MEDIEVALISM: *NOCRION: CONTE ALLOBROGE* (1747)

CATHERINE LÉGLU

The Old French Fabliau was a popular source of inspiration for eighteenth-century writers of short, scabrous tales. Recent research, notably by Alicia Montoya, Kris Peeters and Nicholas Cronk, views this reception of an archaic genre as a key element in the creation of a wide range of fields such as modern philology, medievalism and pornography.[1] Diderot's allegorical *roman licencieux*, *Les Bijoux indiscrets* (1748), published anonymously and without a named publisher, is known to derive from the medieval fabliau *Du chevalier qui fist parler les cons*.[2] It was accepted from the time of its publication that the novel's direct model

[1] On the importance of the development of philology as a system of knowledge, as outlined originally by Michel Foucault in *Les Mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris : Gallimard, 1966), see Alicia C. Montoya, *Medievalist Enlightenment from Charles Perrault to Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2013), pp.185-220 (on the fabliau, p.198). Kris Peeters, 'La Découverte littéraire du fabliau au XVIII[e] siècle: le Comte de Caylus dans l'histoire d'un genre médiéval', *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 106 (2006), 827–42. Nicholas Cronk, 'Le "Mémoire sur les fabliaux" de Caylus', in *Medievalism and 'manière gothique' in Enlightenment France*, ed. by Peter Damian-Grint (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2006), pp. 237–60. Serena Lunardi, 'Lire les fabliaux au Moyen Âge et au XVIII[e] siècle: les manuscrits Paris, BNF, fr. 2168 et Paris, Arsenal, 2770', in *Lire en contexte: enquête sur les manuscrits de fabliaux*, ed. by Olivier Collet, Francis Gingras and Richard Trachsler, *Études françaises*, 48.3 (2012), 59–93. On pornography, see Larry Scanlon, 'Cultural Studies and Carnal Speech: the long, profane shadow of the fabliau', in *Medieval Cultural Studies: Essays in Honour of Stephen Knight*, ed. by Ruth Evans, Helen Fulton and David Matthews (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), pp. 23–38.

[2] *Nocrion, conte allobroge* ([n.p.]: [n. pub.], 1747). Printed with an edition of the medieval text in *Nocrion, conte allobroge, d'après l'édition originale de 1747, avec une préface et des notes de Jemet suivi du fabliau de Garin; Le Chevalier qui faisoit parler les C... et C.* (Brussels: Gay et Doucé, 1881). The best modern edition of the Old French poem is in *Nouveau Recueil Complet des Fabliaux*

was not the medieval text itself, but rather an adaptation of it, *Nocrion: conte allobroge* (1747). Indeed, *Nocrion* was reprinted in 1781 in the 'Bibliothèque amusante' series under the title *L'Origine des bijoux indiscrets*.[3] *Nocrion* was also adapted into English verse by John Hall-Stevenson, a friend of Lawrence Sterne, published in a privately-printed volume.[4]

This paper argues that *Nocrion* is more than an offshoot of the Old French fabliau or a source for Diderot's *Bijoux indiscrets*. Rather, *Nocrion* can be appreciated more fully as an adaptation of a medieval text that turns a critical eye both on its source and on its own literary milieu. Both a translation and an adaptation, it places its object in a new context by decoding and reinscribing the text within an emerging scientific enquiry, concerned with nomenclature and categorization. This scabrous little *conte* is less a derivative work (borrowed writing) than a means of handing knowledge on to new audiences and writers (new and transformative writing). To focus on its role as a means of passing on knowledge is important, because within the *conte* the nature of such knowledge is presented as illicit and revelatory, both titillating and inherently secret.

The Old French fabliau entitled *Le chevalier qui fist parler les cons* (attributed to a certain Garin) is about a man acquiring the power to make the *con* (the vagina) speak, thus unlocking the intimate secrets of animate females, both human and animal. In six of the seven surviving medieval copies of this poem, a knight and his squire travelling in the woods happen upon a trio of fairies bathing at a fountain.[5] The squire steals the fairies' clothes, and they grant three gifts to the knight in exchange for their return. These are that first, he will be welcomed everywhere he goes (especially by women); second, he will be able to make both human and animal vaginas speak, and third, if they are prevented from doing so, then their

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(NRCF), ed. by Willem Noomen and Nico Van den Boogaard, 6 vols (Assen – Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1986), III, pp. 45–173.

[3] 'L'origine des bijoux indiscrets; ou, *Nocrion, conte allobroge'*, in *Les Sonnettes; ou, Mémoires de Monsieur le marquis d'**** (London: [n. pub.], 1781), pp. 181–212. On the relationship with Diderot's text, see Marc-André Bernier, *Libertinage et figures du savoir: rhétorique et roman libertin dans la France des Lumières (1734–1751)* (Laval – Paris: Presses de l'Université Laval – L'Harmattan, 2001), p. 47. Geeta Beeharry-Paray, '*Les Bijoux indiscrets* de Diderot: Pastiche, forgerie ou charge du conte crébillonien?', *Diderot Studies*, 28 (2000), 21–37 (p. 24).

[4] A.S. [John Hall-Stevenson], 'The Privy Counsellor's Tale', in *Crazy Tales* 2nd edn (London: [n. pub.], 1764), pp. 91-107.

[5] *NRCF*, III, pp. 45–173.

anus will speak instead. Unsurprisingly sceptical about the value of such a gift, the knight and his squire test its efficacy on the first female that they meet: a mare ridden by a cleric. Thanks to the gift of universal popularity, the knight is welcomed at the court of a count and countess, and that night, the mistress of the house sends her waiting-woman to his bed. The knight finds out from the *pucelle*'s vagina that she is with him purely on an errand from the countess. The terrified girl then informs her mistress about his powers, whereupon the countess stuffs her vagina with cloth, invites the knight and the squire to stay for dinner, and wagers sixty *livres* in public that the knight cannot make her genitals speak. The squire reminds his master about the third gift, and the knight asks the countess's anus to explain what has happened. Having prised stories from a series of women's bodies, the knight wins both the bet and the money, and he subsequently leads a life of ease.

Nocrion's Preface bridges the five-hundred-year gap between the *conte* and the medieval poem. This is a letter from an anonymous gentleman who cites a summary of the fabliau that was published in 1581 by Claude Fauchet (1530–1602). The gentleman relies on a named male authority from the Renaissance to introduce his prose adaptation of the medieval poem, set within a frame narrative that focuses on a female narrator (Prologue and Epilogue).[6] The book's frontispiece adds yet another frame (Figure 1). There, the title *Nocrion* appears in elaborate capital letters, floating in the sky above the subtitle, *Conte Allobroge*. Beneath these words can be seen the knight and his squire as they chance upon three naked women in a forest of spiky conifers. The strange, nonsensical word *Nocrion* hangs over a bucolic vision of female nakedness and male gazing. One of the women gazes back at the two men, with the subtle effect of redressing the balance between viewing subject and observed object.

Figure 1: Frontispiece of *Nocrion, conte allobroge* by Charles-Nicolas Cochin ([n.p.]: [n. pub.], 1747). By kind permission of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.[7]

[6] Claude Fauchet, *Recueil de l'origine de la langue et la poésie françoise, ryme et romans* (Paris: Mamert Patisson, 1581), pp. 179–80.

[7] Christian Michel, *Charles-Nicolas Cochin et le livre illustré au XVIII^e siècle: avec un catalogue raisonné des livres illustrés par Cochin 1735–1790* (Geneva: Droz, 1987), p. 241.

Female nudity, clothing and femininity unveiled are a theme throughout the short text, as is the looming presence of that unsayable word that is symbolised by, and contained within, the apparently meaningless 'Nocrion'. In fact, the word is an anagram of 'con noir', suggesting that the opening scene of female nudity spied upon by clothed and predatory men is overshadowed by the darkness of the men's invisible target, for in this tale's medieval and early modern versions, the woman's body parts might speak in obedience to a male authority, but they nevertheless acquire speech, and thus develop a subject position of their own.

The prologue and epilogue of *Nocrion* reframe the fabliau as a quest for love as well as power. King or Prince Guigues VI, king of Allobrogie (known also as Amançon le Gaillard), can only be cured of his melancholy by bathing in a woodland fountain and listening to amusing stories that are told by the seven *pucelles* ('girls' and 'virgins' in Old French but by the eighteenth century, exclusively 'virgins') who are competing for his hand in marriage (p. 3). Guigues/Amançon prefaces his storytelling competition by viewing all seven girls unclothed, thus signalling that the physique of a desirable woman is subordinate to her verbal skills; he has after all just been naked himself (pp. 6–7). The seventh girl tells this tale of the speech-provoking knight and thereby wins her prince. The prologue echoes the theft first of the fairies' clothes and then of women's speech in the fabliau. Thus women's nakedness and their speech are set against each other, as vulnerable prey in the old tale but a means to power in the new framing narrative, for the young woman's nudity and speech win her a prestigious marriage. The girl's narrative is interrupted only once by her hesitation over saying the unacceptable and of course crucial word, *con* (p. 17).

The book is built on repeated reversals of power: the bathing women and clothed men on the frontispiece give way to the bathing prince and his unclothed maidens in the prologue, one of whom narrates a tale about bathing women and clothed men, and so forth. The knight gazing on the naked fairies echoes the myth of Acteon, another reflection of the oscillation between hunter and hunted, subject and object, which marks the text (p. 14). The fabliau ends with the social triumph of the knight, but the epilogue closes with that of the seventh girl in marrying Guigues/Amançon. However, the fabliau's original ending is altered, inasmuch as the Countess leaps into marriage with the knight as soon as he has defeated her attempt to preserve her secrets, to the great contentment of her 'babillard' ('chatterbox') (pp. 33–34). In both the fabliau and the frame tale, making women's bodies speak is more effective in bringing couples together than more conventional economies of the male gaze and female objectification, but the modernized *conte* also relates women's storytelling to success rather than shame.

Nocrion has been attributed to three authors, one of whom was the artist, writer and antiquarian Anne-Claude-Philippe de Tubières, comte de Caylus (1692–1765. Caylus might have been inspired by Crébillon's libertine novel *Le Sopha* (1742), in which a prince's soul inhabits a series of sofas (and a woman's body), giving him insight into women's secrets. Like some so-called it-narratives or object-narratives (a vogue in English-language literature more than in French) in which inanimate objects or animals are the storyteller, the sofa contains a trapped human soul and (it would seem) a voyeur who is keen to tell all.[8] The joke in *Nocrion* is that the genitalia of women are endowed with their own intellect and function independently of the human mind; even the countess gagging her own nether 'mouth' cannot prevent her words from pouring out. It may also reflect a medical belief that women's genitals preserved the imprint of their every sexual encounter. Indeed, medical and other beliefs concerning the impression of people and objects upon a woman at conception impinge on this text.[9] *Nocrion* is an object-narrative that explores the potential for finding multiple voices within a single human subject.

While acknowledging the importance of texts such as *Nocrion* for our understanding of the eighteenth-century conception of the female body as 'un corps à lire', and better still, 'un discours', this paper focuses on the problematic use of archaic, medieval and foreign languages to explore (or to put it more simply, to know) aspects of the feminine that were deemed unspeakable.[10] In addition, *Nocrion* makes explicit the importance for its author(s) of translation through time and language. Its status as an adaptation is neither secondary nor inherently derivative. It is a work that seeks to render its source's humour and exploration of language in terms that are intelligible to an eighteenth-century audience, while at the same time both defining and creating that audience as one that is properly scientific.

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[8] Jonathan Lamb, *The Things Things Say* (Princeton – Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp.208-211.

[9] Bonnie Blackwell, 'Corkscrews and Courtesans: Sex and Death in Circulation Novels', in *The Secret Life of Things*, pp.265-91 (p.280). Holly Tucker, *Pregnant Fictions : Childbirth and the Fairy Tale in Early Modern France* (Detroit MI : Wayne State University Press, 2003), pp. 83-86, 99-103.

[10] Anne Deneys-Tunney, 'la sémiotisation du corps féminin dans le roman libertin du XVIII^{e} siècle', in *The Eighteenth-Century Body: Art History, Literature, Medicine*, ed. by Angelica Goodden (Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2002), pp. 49–58 (p. 51).

Eighteenth-century appropriations of medieval texts are well-known for their engagement with the development of scholarship as well as of the literature of diversion.[11] *Nocrion* has suffered in part because *Les Bijoux indiscrets* long enjoyed notoriety as a pornographic potboiler; the latter's narrative of thirty speaking vaginas may well have led to Diderot's imprisonment in 1749.[12] Both Diderot's book and its source are concerned with producing and therefore defining the boundaries of illicit speech; but this is not to challenge the book's entertaining effect.[13] As a similarly scabrous tale, *Nocrion* emanates the thrill that is derived from the articulation of forbidden words. Diderot's novel notably makes use of euphemism (notably of course the notorious *bijoux*), as well as of fragments of Latin, French, Spanish and English to name the *bijoux*' actions. The foreign idioms echo the *conte*'s exploration of the appropriate language for both naming and not naming the natural parts of the body, seen as obscene and unspeakable according to the social practice of the time.

Moreover, the debates about naming we find in Diderot – gained from his source – echo similar debates in scientific discourse, notably in the work of Buffon.[14] *Nocrion*'s exploration of indirect naming coincides with Buffon's comments published in 1749 that the

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[11] Montoya, *Medievalist Enlightenment*. Aurélie Zygel-Basso, 'A Fairy Troubadour? Medieval Matter and the "bon vieux temps" in Women's Fairy Tales (1730-50)', in *Early Modern Medievalisms : The Interplay Between Scholarly Reflection and Artistic Production*, ed. Alicia Montoya, Sophie van Romburgh and Wim van Anrooij (Leiden ; Brill, 2010), pp. 285-304 (on Caylus : 289-90).

[12] 'Quand j'étais jeune, j'habitais le 4e étage, j'écrivais des sottises, on m'a enfermé au donjon de Vincennes pour mes *Bijoux indiscrets*', cited by Beeharry-Paray, '*Les Bijoux indiscrets*', pp. 26–28. See also Odile Richard-Pauchet, 'Mangogul "odysséen" dans *Les Bijoux indiscrets*: le découvreur et le poète', *Recherches sur Diderot et sur 'L'Encyclopédie'*, 46 (2011), <http://rde.revues.org/4828> [accessed 25 October 2018], and by the same author, '*Les Bijoux indiscrets*: variation secrète sur un thème libertin', *Recherches sur Diderot et sur L'Encyclopédie*, 24 (1998), 27–37 < http://www.persee.fr/doc/rde_0769-0886_1998_num_24_1_1413 > [accessed 25 October 2018].

[13] Anne Beate Maurseth, '*Les Bijoux indiscrets*: un roman de divertissement', *Recherches sur Diderot et sur L'Encyclopédie*, 33 (2002), <http://rde.revues.org/78> [accessed 25 October 2018].

[14] Hanna Roman, 'Naming as Natural Process and Historical Narrative in Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*, 1749–55', in *Naming, Unnaming, and Renaming*, ed. by Kate E. Tunstall and Wilda Anderson (= *Romance Studies*, 31.3–4 (2013)), 238–50. See also Caroline Warman, 'Caught Between Neologism and the Unmentionable: The Politics of Naming and Non-naming in 1790s France', in *Naming, Unnaming*, ed. Tunstall and Anderson, pp. 264–76.

gesture of apportioning names to natural phenomena was not tantamount to increasing the sum of knowledge concerning those objects:

> [O]n s'imagine sçavoir davantage, parce qu'on a augmenté le nombre des expressions symboliques & des phrases sçavantes, & on ne fait point attention que tous ces arts ne sont que des échafaudages pour arriver à la science, & non pas la science elle-même.[15]

Buffon contended that the names ascribed to plants and animals by Linnaeus were couched in difficult taxonomies and expressed in complicated language, with the result that science was being masked unnecessarily by the very names that were intended to be its support.[16] Buffon and Linnaeus had developed a methodology based on visual observation of features, resemblances and differences in the natural world. *Nocrion*, on the other hand, addresses the problem of naming something that exists in Nature but that cannot be seen: women's sexual experience. It presents an attempt to give voice to this unseen, unsayable object of enquiry. The experiment in observation, identification and classification carried out in this text is therefore couched in speech and not in the data gleaned from sight.

There is nothing accidental about the book's echo of emerging scientific practices. The three authors to which *Nocrion* has been attributed to include Caylus, an important early medievalist whose *Mémoire sur les fabliaux* was presented to the Académie royale des inscriptions et des belles-lettres in July 1746.[17] *Nocrion* is also attributed to the prolific writer of *contes* and comic theatre, Thomas-Simon Gueullette (1683–1766), author of a modernized version of the fifteenth-century prose romance of *Jehan de Saintré* (1725), and the third proposed author is François-Joachim de Pierre, future cardinal de Bernis (1715–1794).[18] In

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[15] Quoted by Roman, 'Naming as Natural Process', pp. 238–39.

[16] Ibid., p. 243.

[17] Peeters, 'la Découverte', pp. 828–30. Caylus, 'Mémoire sur les fabliaux par M. Le Comte de Caylus', in *Mémoire de littérature, tirés des registres de l'Académie royale des Inscriptions et belles-lettres*, 20 (Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1753), pp. 352–76. The text is edited by Cronk, 'Le "Mémoire sur les fabliaux" de Caylus', pp. 241–57. Angus Martin, '"Les amours du bon vieux temps": medieval themes in French prose fiction, 1700–1750', in *Medievalism and 'manière* gothique', ed. Damian-Grint, pp. 15–36 (p. 24).

[18] Peeters accepts the attribution of *Nocrion* to Bernis, in 'La Découverte', p. 829, n. 9. See also *Le Comte de Caylus: les arts et les lettres: Actes du colloque international Université d'Anvers (UFSIA) et Voltaire Foundation Oxford, 26–27 mai, 2000*, ed. by Nicholas Cronk and Kris Peeters

the mid-1740s, Caylus held weekly writing *ateliers*, where participants agreed the level and style of language that they would use, so the text may have been written collectively.[19]

Scientific enquiry involves the collation and comparison of similar data, in order to develop general hypotheses. Caylus's *Mémoire* on the fabliaux in 1746 (not published until 1753) just precedes *Nocrion*. The fictional prefatory letter to *Nocrion* is dated December 1746, with a printing date of 1747 on the frontispiece. In 1746, Caylus published anonymously a translation of another fabliau concerned with exposing sexual secrets, *Le Mantel mal taillé* (or *Court-Mantel*) in his themed compilation, *Les Manteaux*.[20] In this fabliau, a magical 'badly-cut cloak' sits either too short or too long on unfaithful women, causing chaos at the court of King Arthur.[21] Mme de Graffigny (1695–1753) was impressed to discover that he had used a medieval manuscript as one of his sources.[22] *Les Manteaux* is a compilation of eleven *contes* and one *chanson* on the theme of the cloak throughout world history, literature and languages; only one of them is an obscene fabliau. The second part, '2e partie, que l'on peut se dispenser de lire', provides scholarly notes that are variously serious and ridiculous. The joke lies in the banality of the cloak as the object of erudition, possibly echoing object-narratives that give voice to a pin or a coin, though in *Les Manteaux* the cloak provokes speech in others but it remains strictly non-verbal.[23]

(Amsterdam – New York: Rodopi, 2004), p. 248. On Gueullette, see Martin, '"Les amours du bon vieux temps"', pp. 21–22.

[19] Jacqueline Hellegouarc'h, 'Notes sur Caylus et l'écriture collective au XVIIIe siècle', *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 106 (2006), 405–22 (p. 408).

[20] *Les Manteaux, recueil* ([Paris] The Hague: [n. pub.], 1746). 'Le manteau mal taillé', 1ère partie, pp. 143–81. *Les Manteaux* was reprinted in Caylus's *Œuvres badines complètes*, 12 vols (Amsterdam – Paris: Visse, 1787), VI (1ère partie), and VII (2e partie). Peeters, 'La Découverte', pp. 829–30. Cronk, 'Le "Mémoire sur les fabliaux" de Caylus', p. 239. The Old French text is edited in *The Lay of Mantel*, ed. and trans. by Glyn S. Burgess and Leslie C. Brook (Cambridge : D.S. Brewer, 2013).

[21] Summarized in *The Lay of Mantel*, pp.8-10.

[22] Hellegouarc'h, 'Notes sur Caylus', pp. 413–14. On Caylus's treatment of this text, see Geoffrey Wilson, *A Medievalist in the Eighteenth Century: Le Grand d'Aussy and the Fabliaux ou Contes* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1975), pp. 273–74.

[23] Christopher Flint, 'Speaking Objects: the circulation of stories in eighteenth-century prose fiction', in *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-narratives in Eighteenth-Century*, ed. by Mark Blackwell (Lewisburg : Bucknell University Press, 2007), pp.162-186 (see list of speaking objects, p.166). See also the study by Lamb, *The Things Things Say*.

Like *Nocrion*, *Les Manteaux* rests on a scholarly attention to sources. The 'Notice sur le Court-Mantel' is placed at the close of this second part (2e partie, pp. 111–28),[24] but it is far from parodic. Caylus notes the differences between the sixteenth-century prose text that he has used for his own version, and two Old French verse poems that he has studied and partly transcribed from manuscripts. He compares different copies of his source and seeks to establish the best version.[25] His 'Notice' set a precedent in its serious, informed analysis of the language, narrative and intertextual references of three versions of his text.[26] It also defines the methodology sketched out in *Nocrion*: Fauchet's sixteenth-century summary, followed by close scrutiny of the medieval text, all set in an appealing narrative frame for a modern reader.

It is important to note that the Old French fabliau does not betray a specific interest in unsayable speech. The fabliau tradition is famously direct in naming sexual and excremental matters. Charles Muscatine argues that obscene speech in medieval fabliaux should be interpreted as such only if it is clearly designated as either shocking or unsayable. In this light, he identifies only four fabliaux (out of a corpus of 170) that make an issue of sexual language, invoking social unease among their protagonists 'as if it were a newly contested subject'.[27] These texts debunk the use of euphemisms or silence concerning sex, specifically in a courtly milieu, and most particularly among women. In his response to Muscatine's suggestions, R. Howard Bloch highlights their linguistic play, and in particular their protagonists' use of periphrasis and substitution as devices for igniting desire in their decorous, secretly prurient love-objects. Bloch suggests that the fabliaux' readers are 'turned on by the turning of language from a proper signification to an improper or metaphoric one.

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[24] It is taken from 'un manuscrit de la Bibliothèque du Roy, no 7980', described as 'ung très ancien livre que a peine pouvoye je lire' (1ère partie, p. 143). 'Notice sur le court-mantel', 2e partie, pp. 111–28.

[25] Caylus, 'Notice', pp. 113–23.

[26] The revised third edition of Legrand d'Aussy's collection reproduced Caylus's text and part of his 'curieuse notice'. Legrand d'Aussy, *Fabliaux ou contes, troisième édition considérablement augmentée*, rev. ed. by A. A. Renouard (Paris: Renouard, 1829), I, pp. 126–51.

[27] Charles Muscatine, 'The Fabliaux, Courtly Culture, and the (Re) invention of vulgarity', in *Obscenity: Social Control and Artistic Creation in the European Middle Ages*, ed. by Jan M. Ziolkowski (Leiden – Boston – Cologne: Brill, 1998) pp. 281–92 (p. 289). See also Daron Burrows, '"Ele boute son doi en son con…": the question of Anglo-Norman obscenity', *Reinardus*, 27 (2015), 33–57.

They thus define an eroticism that is by definition to some extent perverse'.[28] In many ways, *Nocrion* engages indirectly with others in this group of fabliaux: obscene euphemisms are the key target of *La Demoiselle qui ne pooit oïr parler de foutre*, in which a young man seduces a squeamish girl by using animal metaphors to designate the genitals.[29] *Nocrion*'s framing narrative echoes *Le Jugement des cons*, a fabliau in which three young women compete for a husband by describing their *cons* before an all-male jury, once again by using metaphor and periphrasis.[30]

Bloch also stresses that the Old French fabliaux are often quite restrictive in their treatment of human sexuality, which they depict as congruent with medieval canon law: binary, heteronormative and procreative in function if not in purpose. He notes that descriptions of the sex act are often perfunctory or elided. In more recent studies, Anne Klosowska and Tim Pugh have both taken issue with this restraining (rather than restrained) view of the fabliau tradition, but it remains that in these poems, sexual actions are often less subversive than erotic words.[31] In *Nocrion*, sexual activity and nudity are not forbidden but they serve heterosexual monogamy alone. Instead, the language, content and audience of the book are all depicted as either secret or inappropriate, in need of scholarly justification as well as of a gloss. Caylus and his associates recontextualized their medieval object of study, using it to articulate concerns about the proper use of speech as well as the proper classification and naming of objects of enquiry in a context that included *libertinage*. Their work hints at what Couvreur has termed the moralizing dimension of the medievalism of La Curne de Sainte-Palaye (1696-1781).[32]

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[28] R. Howard Bloch, 'Modest Maids and Modified Nouns', in *Obscenity*, ed. Ziolkowski, pp. 293–307 (pp. 298–301, quotation on pp. 300–01).

[29] The fabliau survives in three versions. Version I is edited in *NCRF*, IV, pp. 57–89.

[30] Text and translation in *The French Fabliau: B.N.MS. 837*, ed. and trans. by Raymond Eichmann and John DuVal, 2 vols (New York: Garland, 1985), II, pp. 48–55.

[31] Bloch, 'Modest Maids and Modified Nouns', pp. 293–95. Anna Klosowska, *Queer Love in the Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), pp. 117–44, and (with reference to Chaucer's fabliaux), Tim Pugh, *Queering Medieval Genres* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 45–79.

[32] Manuel Couvreur, '*D'Aucassin et Nicolette* au Chevalier du soleil: Grétry, Philidor et le roman en romances', in *Medievalism and 'manière gothique*', ed. by Damian-Grint, pp. 124–51 (pp. 124–28). See also Montoya, *Medievalist Enlightenment*, pp.185-220.

Sainte-Palaye has been credited with igniting the passion for medieval French literature within the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres.[33] He presented his ideas concerning the Old French fabliau in the same year as Caylus's *Mémoire*. As Montoya has shown, the two men had different aims. Etienne Barbazan (1696–1770) later acknowledged Caylus and not Sainte-Palaye as the inspiration for his three-volume *Fabliaux et contes de poetes françois*. Legrand d'Aussy would also acknowledge the influence of Caylus's *Mémoire sur les fabliaux*.[34] Like Caylus, Sainte-Palaye compared different versions and included notes on the language, vocabulary and historical allusions of the texts.[35] However, in *Les Manteaux,* the modernized fabliau is set in a frame that pokes fun at the scientific approach to etymology and literary history. Where *Nocrion* rests on the narrator's and readers' inability to name the *con* except by wrapping it in euphemism or scrambling it as an anagram, *Les Manteaux* names an over-abundance of cloaks. It is dedicated to a Monsieur Manteau and his wife, Madame Manteau and the word is in the title of each of its eleven stories. The Preface provides an etymology, with 'dérivés' and 'composés' that heavy-handedly drive home the text's obsessive reiteration of that single noun. Furthermore, the word *manteau* is printed in italics throughout the book:

> Il seroit assez difficile de décider, et peut-être assez peu important de discuter, si le mot *Manteau* vient de Mante, ou si Mante vient *de Manteau,* Il est sûr du moins que les dérivés mantelet, manteline, mantille, mandille, etc. et les composés du mot *Manteau* viennent de l'un ou de l'autre, à moins qu'ils ne viennent tous de *Mantel*, vieux mot Celtique (*Les Manteaux,* p. ix).

Through reiteration, the banal word acquires a comical prominence. The modernized fabliau *Le Manteau mal-taillé* sits well in this anxious mound of cloth, as its magical cloak is cumbersome yet also exposes a woman's intimate secrets. *Les Manteaux* is therefore at the

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[33] Lunardi, 'Lire les fabliaux', pp. 84–85.

[34] On the differences between Caylus and Sainte-Palaye, see Montoya, *Medievalist Enlightenment*, pp.187-90. Jean-Baptiste de La Curne de Sainte-Palaye, *Mémoire sur l'ancienne chevalerie, considérée comme un établissement politique et militaire*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Paris: Veuve Duchesne, 1781). Pierre Jean-Baptiste Legrand d'Aussy, *Fabliaux ou contes des XII^e^ et XIII^e^ siècles, traduits ou extraits d'après divers manuscrits du tems* (Paris: Onfroy, 1779–1781). Anonymous [Pierre Jean-Baptiste Legrand d'Aussy and Barthélémy Imbert], *Choix de fabliaux mis en vers*, 2 vols (Geneva and Paris: Prault, 1788). Wilson, *A Medievalist in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 274–75.

[35] Lunardi, 'Lire les fabliaux', pp. 87–88.

opposite end of the spectrum from *Nocrion*. Both are 'fidelity test' narratives, but *Nocrion* focuses on making the hidden body speak, while *Les Manteaux* wraps its insights in futile information.[36] Adapting a fabliau for a modern audience becomes a vehicle for ideas concerning the value and validity of words. In his play with the unsayable, Caylus draws on Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meung's *Le Roman de la Rose*, a work that combines erudition with sexual humour, no doubt on the basis of the version that had been published with a glossary in 1735.[37]

Nocrion is also an erudite work. It seems to be based on Claude Fauchet's account of the copy of *Le chevalier qui fit parler les cons* in Paris BNF MS f. fr. 837. In fact, the text of fr. 837 breaks off less than half-way through.[38] Two other manuscripts now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France contain the full version of the poem. Of these, the copy in BNF MS f. fr. 19152 is closest to the version that was used for *Nocrion*, and it is also the manuscript that Caylus cites most frequently in his *Mémoire sur les fabliaux* (it was then called Saint-Germain-des-Près n^{o} 1830).[39] Fr. 19152 had been bequeathed in 1732 to the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Près. It is of course possible that Caylus and his co-authors also worked from transcriptions, as did Sainte-Palaye.[40] In addition, fr. 19152 contains the owner mark of 'Philippe Alamande, dame de Chassenaige' (fols 8^{v} and 127^{v}), probably Sassenage in the Dauphiné (Isère). The first note in *Nocrion* states that the 'Allobroges' were an ancient Gaulish tribe of the Dauphiné. A seventeenth-century source described the *Allobroges* as a tribe who assisted Caesar in his Gallic Wars and who inhabited regions of Savoy, Piedmont and Dauphiné. Voltaire later wrote to the cardinal de Bernis that he wished to spend the rest of his life between France and Geneva: 'J'ai bâti chez les Allobroges; il faut mourir

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[36] Bart Besamusca, 'Characters and narrators as interpreters of fidelity tests in medieval Arthurian fiction', *Neophilologus*, 94:2 (2010), 289-299.

[37] Nicolas Lenglet Dufresnoy, *Le Roman de la Rose, par Guillaume de Lorris, & Jean de Meun dit Clopinel, revu sur plusieurs éditions & sur quelques anciens manuscrits*, 3 vols (Paris: Veuve Pissot; Amsterdam: Bernard, 1735). See Peter Damian-Grint, 'From *Trésor de recherches* to *Vocabulaire austrasien*: Old French dictionaries in France, 1655–1777', in *Medievalism and 'manière gothique*, ed. Damian-Grint, pp. 99–123 (p. 99).

[38] *NRCF*, III, pp. 45–50.

[39] BNF MS f. fr. 19152, fols 58a–60c; BNF MS f. fr. 1593, fols 211b–215a; a longer revised version is in BNF MS f. fr. 25545, fols 77c–82d; see *NRCF*, III, pp. 45–50.

[40] Cronk, 'Le "Mémoire sur les fabliaux" de Caylus', p. 244, Lunardi, 'Lire les fabliaux', pp. 87–88. Wilson, *A Medievalist in the Eighteenth Century*, pp. 290–92.

Allobroge.'[41] The *conte allobroge* also reflects the Genevan Rousseau's 'muse allobroge' (1742).

Nocrion accumulates a body of knowledge, old and new, that is *allobroge*, placed in two contrasting realms. The prefatory letter to a certain Monsieur *** is by an *honnête homme* who has received a copy of the scabrous *conte* in his bucolic retreat. He has responded with a letter and a revised version of the tale that he begs its author to keep private. He complains that he finds the *conte* derivative, having also identified the medieval source as unacceptable because 'quelque plaisant qu'il soit au fond, le titre seul auroit avec raison, revolté toutes nos dames' (p. i). From the start therefore, the problem is twofold: the story is borrowed rather than new, and it is unacceptable to female readers, but the answer to that problem is not silence, rather a discreet transmission of the text in new, decorous language.

The gentleman calls the fabliau 'un conte de lourde mensonge' and offers to present his own version of the offensive text in a language that he calls *vieux François*, because '[c]e langage autorise des expressions dont on ne s'effarouche pas comme on le ferait aujourd'hui' (p. ii). The reader is invited to consider what could possibly turn a word into a source of fear in the present when it had no such power in the past. The gentleman signs off by urging secrecy (a request that has clearly been ignored by Monsieur ***) and describing himself as 'Votre, &c.' According to the gentleman, Fauchet's truncated summary of the tale is entitled '*Le Chevalier qui fist parler les &c*.', but Fauchet's printed text reads: 'le Cheualier qui faisoit parler les deuans & derrieres des femmes'.[42] It is significant that *Nocrion* avoids Fauchet's periphrasis and substitutes a transparent three-letter sign, *&c*, in place of the allegedly repellent word *con* that it has slyly reintroduced. The gentleman's anonymity might be preserved via a conventional abbreviation but it also seems that he has taken on the name of the unnameable *&c*.

Any argument that archaic speech is freer than modern speech seems flawed, for the gentleman adds, 'ne pouvant faire mieux, je me suis sauvé par le moyen d'un mot que j'ai

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[41] Philibert Monet, *Nouveau et dernier dictionaire des langues francoise et latine: assorti des plus utiles curiositez* (Paris: Claude LeBeau, 1646), I, items AL and DA (no pagination). *Correspondance de Voltaire et du Cardinal de Bernis depuis 1761 jusqu'à 1777, publié par le citoyen Bourgoing, membre-associé de l'Institut National* (Paris: Dupont et l'Editeur, An VII de la République [1798–99]), p. 144 (letter dated 1763). Rousseau had given the title *La Muse allobroge* to a personal compilation in 1742.

[42] Fauchet, *Recueil*, p. 179.

emprunté de l'Allemand' (p. ii). He claims that he has sought safety from censure in a modern foreign language rather than in past versions of French. In the interests of accessibility, he peppers *Nocrion* with footnotes for polite Old French terms such as *gaber*, *cointe*, *sirvantes* and *pimpelotter* (pp. 2, 4, 25). Moreover, he adds that he has read his story to a company of married ladies whose ability to understand Old French without an interpreter is due to their familiarity with 'vieux romans'. He assures the reader that these well-read women were even able to enjoy the humour of the tale, 'sans se gendarmer du mot Allemand'. A strange reversal seems to have taken place: German is now *more* shocking to its readers than Old French, the language of archaic romances. The gentleman imagines well-read ladies as capable of taking up arms ('se gendarmer') against that single German word, while exhibiting a remarkable ease with medieval idiom. The tension between the antiquarian writer's caution and his no-less erudite women readers' open-mindedness concerning old texts exposes the power play in censorship. *Nocrion* offers a proto- (rather than pseudo-) scholarly version of the fabliau, treating it as a text that is received with trepidation and linguistic sleight of hand by two men, while being completely accessible to women who read romances. The matter of the tale is the secret language and experiences of women's bodies, but its female readers are fluent readers of old and foreign languages.

Archaisms, Old French, foreign words and footnotes all threaten to conceal the stark reality of an obscene tale. The Prologue reveals that Nocrion is in fact the name of the girl who wins Guigue/Amançon's hand in marriage. Pucelle Nocrion would like to tell her tale, but she asks Guigue/Amançon to provide her with a suitable substitute for the word that will feature heavily in it and that she cannot utter: 'Ah! Sire, dispensez me en, ou me enseignez un equivaillant, lors je obéirai, car ne suis assez grande clergesse pour cela' (p. 9). The queen mother (Bietrix, whose blonde hair causes her to be known also as Blondine) (p. 2) urges Guigues/Amançon to be inventive with his language: 'servez vous des anagrame, periphrase, l'ologriphe, ou autre moyen duisant' (p. 10). Guigues/Amançon rejects his mother's erudite rhetoric in favour of foreign languages. He suggests a number of linguistic options for saying the unsayable: '[V]oulez vous que je lui donne un nom Latin, Italien, Espagnol, Allemand?' Bietrix/Blondine chooses the German noun *Fotz* because she is certain that the group's 'pudibondes oreilles' will not be wounded if the Prince uses a word taken from a language that none of them can understand (p. 11). Whereas the prefatory letter made the choice of a decorous German word the prerogative of the gentleman, in the narrative it is Guigue/Amançon's mother who selects it.

The noun *Fotz* replaces the unsayable *con*, no doubt playing to the erudite audience's awareness that the term echoes the Old French past participle of *foutre* (there is no helpful footnote in the text). In varieties of modern German, *Fotze* and *Fotz* refer to the pudenda and the backside, but they can also designate the mouth.[43] The result is neither more nor less obscene than leaving *con* unchanged, for the *Fotz* of the mare, the serving maid nor the widowed countess cannot be anything else. Pointless substitution unveils a rhetorical strategy of obscene periphrasis, using obscure words to convey a meaning that has been agreed upon by the reading community. This community includes the young female storyteller's audience, the ladies who are supposed to listen to the gentleman's version in the opening letter, and the unknown multitude of individuals who will read the published book.

The tale that opens as a narrative of man's dominion over female sexual experience is told by an eponymous female protagonist who is in control of her body and of her own story. The mysterious, obscene anagram *Nocrion* turns out to be the name of the modest young lady storyteller. The fact that Guigues/Amançon and other characters in the *conte* have two names (a given name and a nickname) signals the text's exploration of metonymy as a narrative strategy. Just as Bietrix is known as Blondine because her hair is blonde and Guigues is called 'le Gaillard' because he enjoys risqué humour (*gaillardises*), so the Pucelle owes her name, one presumes, to her *con noir*: she embodies the unsayable and invisible secret that she carries. Furthermore, the term *pucelle* has the double meaning of 'girl' and 'virgin', meaning that 'Pucelle Nocrion' both names and describes her marriageable state.

Bietrix/Blondine champions indirect speech: 'servez vous des anagrame, periphrase, l'ologriphe, ou autre moyen duisant.' Her *ologriphe* is an archaic form of *holographe* (the author's authentic, hand-written document), not a term of rhetoric at all. It signals the characters' and multiple narrators' quests for the body's authentic expression (in the case of a holograph, the writer's hand). Guigue/Amançon struggles with the term 'le lologriphe' as 'par trop obscur et embarrassant' (p. 11). Ironically, he has dismissed anagram as 'par trop court et intelligible' (p. 11), thus giving the game away as far as the word 'nocrion' is concerned. An alternative word for the same object would seem to be the most appropriate option, and indeed periphrasis is the key device throughout the narrative. When the knight has to resort to making the countess's anus speak because she has gagged her vagina, this part

[43] Caylus plays further variations on this word in relation to *Nocrion* in 'La Male Bosse', *Mémoires de l'Académie des colporteurs*, in *Œuvres badines complètes*, X, pp. 305–40 (pp. 329–30). *Fotz* is kept in Hall-Stevenson's verse translation of *Nocrion*.

of the body is designated as ‘le voisin’ (pp. 31–32). Periphrasis is also the key device when Guigue/Amançon marries the modest ‘Pucelle Nocrion’, for their wedding night is the high point of saying-without-naming:

La en après mains baisers préparatifs, plus doux que miel, qui n’étoient proprement baisers, ains appas de sucre et de cannelle; & après avoir sucé le nectar que il cueilloit sur les lèvres coralines de la Pucelle, il entra enfin dans le palais de Gnide, & eut jouissance avec elle a plusieurs reprises du plaisir le plus cher et le plus exquis que sçauroit procurer Cupidon et sa mère. (p. 36)

The narrative moves from simile (‘plus doux que miel’) to mixed metaphors: Pucelle Nocrion’s coral lips somehow produce nectar, and her kisses are only illusory, as in reality they are sweets. The culmination of the fabliau is the *con*’s translation from the allegedly incomprehensible (but transparent) *Fotz*, and into a poetic, obscure ‘palais de Gnide’. The latter may be a mocking allusion to Montesquieu’s anonymously-published erotico-allegorical poem, *Le Temple de Gnide* (1725), which purported to extol the virtues of the mind over those of the senses, but which was also attacked as a work rife with double-entendre. According to Laboulaye, *Le Temple de Gnide* was described in 1725 as a ‘petit livret à demi grec, où les allusions couvrent des obscénités à demi nues’. Its success lay in its power to incite women to acquire both classical learning and medical competence: ‘les femmes disent qu’elles veulent apprendre le grec, puisqu’on y trouve de si jolies cures.’[44]

The *conte* ends by praising Pucelle Nocrion’s clever manipulation of language in the service of both her marriage and of Guigue/Amançon’s lineage:

[L]a nouvelle Roine Nocrion fut si bonne maitresse en subtilité feminine, & sceut tant bien allecher Amançon par paroles lascivement honnêtes, baisers pudiques, & mignards, & embrassements excitatifs, que depuis en ça, le monarque l’aima à toujours, & en eut belle et nombreuse lignée. (p. 36)

This closure displays the text’s agenda as a work that intends to provoke its audience (either in order to titillate or in order to amuse), while also provoking reflection on the uses of speech. Far from a simple exercise in the cultural adaptation of obscenity, turning the fabliau *Du chevalier qui fist parler les cons* into *Nocrion* serves to signal the combination of

[44] Charles-Louis de Montesquieu, *Le Temple de Gnide, et Temple de Gnide mis en vers*, ed. by Edouard Laboulaye (Paris: Garnier, 1876), Préface, p. 9.

learning, cunning and worldliness that is required in order to 'allecher … par paroles lascivement honnêtes'. The *conte allobroge* displaces erudition from the learned society into the hands of women, and focuses on their desire to either give voice to their own physical experience or to keep it silent. This is surely why this modernized fabliau is designated (within the text) as a story that will be comprehensible to any married ladies who have read plenty of 'vieux romans'. It brings a medieval text into the debating circles of the salon, and in so doing provides a means of making the stuff of the past both vivid and thought-provoking. Far from silencing and shaming women's bodies, it invites readers to use their faculty of speech, while historicizing and objectifying the language that they use.

Caylus's *Mémoire sur les fabliaux* argues that the fabliau is superior to both romance and epic poetry.[45] It also suggests that certain words and concepts are rendered either visible or invisible by the choice of style or genre:

> *Elégant & naïf*: […] la façon de conter est un vernis qui embellit tout, & sans lequel l'objet dénué de cette parure, disparoitroit en quelque sorte; le vernis change & varie suivant la nature des choses qu'il doit couvrir, cette variété est plus étendue que celle des couleurs d'un peintre.[46]

Rhetorical varnish makes visible some words that might otherwise be either missed or obscured. The 'objet dénué de cette parure' is both naked and unembellished, and it might disappear 'en quelque sorte'. *Les Manteaux* explores the smothering effect of that prettifying varnish when it overlays the text with layers of information or detail. *Nocrion*, on the other hand, plays with the fantasy of having the power to strip off those layers, without causing the object of enquiry to vanish. In both cases, Caylus explores 'la façon de conter', the means of framing and reinterpreting the old text so that it might speak to its new audience.

At the close of his *Mémoire*, Caylus asserts that the fabliaux reflect a sophisticated literary language and culture based on 'la simplicité, & la naïveté, qui seront toûjours la base du goût vrai, & dont il semble qu'on s'écarte un peu trop aujourd'hui'. This sentiment would soon be echoed in Sainte-Palaye's repudiation of libertinage in favour of medieval sources.[47] However, having hinted that he is using the adjective *naïf* to designate the sexual content of

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[45] Cronk, 'Le "Mémoire sur les fabliaux" de Caylus', pp. 246–48.

[46] Ibid., p. 245. See 'élégant et naïf' in *Les Manteaux*, 2e partie, p. 111.

[47] Cronk, 'Le "Mémoire sur les fabliaux" de Caylus', p. 255. Couvreur, '*D'Aucassin et Nicolette*', pp. 125–28.

the fabliaux without naming it (a content that he claims to deplore), Caylus states that he equates obscenity not with words, but with deeds:

> Ma critique ne tombe point tant encore sur des mots qui n'étant que de convention, peuvent être admis ou bannis par usage ou par politesse, mais sur des fonds qu'en saine morale il n'est pas possible d'admettre, encore moins de rendre publics.[48]

The very naivety of the genre lies in its capacity to give a clear name to body parts that are stifled by social convention. Despite his disavowal of what these parts of the body actually do, Caylus implies that the fabliau explores realms of experience that are otherwise kept silent. Caylus's example was not followed by Barbazan, who published a collection a decade later which includes the Old French text with a glossary (but no modern translation), and with the *con* replaced by ellipses or asterisks : *Du chevalier qui faisoit parler les … & les ….*[49] The ellipsis designates the concealment of a proper name, and here it creates gaps and silences wherever the unsayable words would normally be located. Barbazan's purportedly authentic version therefore simultaneously makes the *con* speak and denies its very presence:

> Il avoit merveillous eur
> De ce soieuz tous asseur,
> Que il faisoit les *** parler.[50]

It would seem here that the unmediated Old French language is insufficiently obscure for the *con* to be written in full. All that is made to speak on the page is ***, a trace of a word that has been silenced.

In terms of the development of the sciences of the Enlightenment, both *Nocrion* and *Les Manteaux* engage with new approaches to natural phenomena and to literary texts, which are observed, categorised and preserved like so many specimens. In other words, there is an engagement in *Nocrion* as well as in *Les Manteaux* with the emerging textual methodologies

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[48] Cronk, 'Le "Mémoire sur les fabliaux" de Caylus', p. 257; and on the genre's sexual content, see p. 247.

[49] Étienne Barbazan, *Fabliaux et contes de poëtes françois des XII^e^, XIII^e^, XIV^e^ et XV^es^ siécles, tirés des meilleurs auteurs*, 3 vols, I (Paris, Vincent, 1756); II–III (Amsterdam: Arkstée & Merkus, 1756), III, pp. 85–122. Cronk, 'Le "Mémoire sur les fabliaux" de Caylus', p. 238.

[50] Barbazan, *Fabliaux et contes*, III, p. 86, ll. 9–11.

of what would become philology.[51] However, there is at the same time an anxiety about categorizing and naming living objects of study. Some animate objects seem destined to remain unseen, and to stay beyond classification even with the use of the most obscure language. These objects are not necessarily voiceless. Their acquisition of a voice, in turn, makes them potentially subjects of knowledge. It is significant that *Nocrion* is a text that seeks to give a new voice to the language and texts of the distant past through a concern with women's voices that is very much of its time. Medievalism is harnessed to the task of naming the expanding world of Enlightenment knowledge, as the Old French fabliau, recast either as a libertine work or as an object of study, found a new audience and a new language.

[51] See note 1, and especially Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses*, pp.262-65.